

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COL. JOHN RISCASSI,
COMMANDER, 2ND STRYKER CAVALRY REGIMENT, 25TH INFANTRY DIVISION,
MULTINATIONAL DIVISION BAGHDAD VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME: 11:00 A.M. EST
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): I'd like to welcome
you to the Bloggers Roundtable. Colonel John RisCassi is the commander, the 2nd Stryker Cavalry
Team, or Cavalry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, out at Multinational Division Baghdad.

And Colonel, do you have an opening statement for us?

COL. RISCASSI: I sure do and welcome to everybody, and I'll just have a quick opening
statement here. Then I'll gladly take your questions in the amount of time we have available. So I
just want to start off with again a brief statement.

The regiment, 2SCR, assumed responsibility as the above-ground force for Multinational
Division Baghdad in September. Our role has been to provide forces across the city and to conduct
clearing operations of the remaining al Qaeda in concentrations in Baghdad. We're currently
providing squadrons or soldiers to four brigade combat teams, and have soldiers operating across
Baghdad.

For the past four months, the regiment's focus was the clearance of the East Rashid security
district, specifically the Hadar mahalla, which was one of the last significant concentrations of al
Qaeda in Baghdad. The regiment had great success in East Rashid. Our soldiers found and
reduced over 100 IEDs and found over 50 caches, including a wide range of munitions, explosives
and weapons.

After 106 days of continuous operations, we have reduced enemy attacks in East Rashid from
over 12 a day to less than one event every two days. Much of this success was the result of
cooperation and tips from the local population, as they expressed their disenchantment of al Qaeda
violence and social restrictions.

In addition to our clearing operations, we supported markets and small businesses across East Rashid, encouraged the creation of CLCs, concerned local citizen groups, and reinforced the local neighborhood action committees. There are now over 2,000 CLCs, including both contracted guards and security volunteers, manning over 100 checkpoints. It is their involvement and courage, in conjunction with the local Iraqi security forces -- (inaudible) -- long-term security and stability in East Rashid.

With that brief update, I'll gladly take your questions.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir. Marisa, you were first on line, why don't you get us started?

Q Yes. Hi, Colonel. My name is Marisa Cochrane. I'm from the Institute for the Study of War. Can you talk a little bit about how instability in Saidiyah is affecting the neighborhoods of East Rashid?

COL. RISCASSI: Okay. In Saidiyah, as you are aware, we operate in East and West Rashid. I've been operating in East Rashid. Saidiyah is in West Rashid. I am -- I was not the landowner of all of Rashid; that was 4th Brigade Dragon, Colonel Ricky Gibbs. As you're aware, all of the Rashid district is linked together, but specifically where I was did not include that AO.

Q But did you see any effects from what was going on in Saidiyah? Any -- did it affect your AO at all? Did any enemy elements move into East Rashid, or what was the interaction there, if there was any?

COL. RISCASSI: You know, I'd have to just speculate a bit that specifically al Qaeda, they do move in and amongst -- not only Saidiyah, all over Baghdad -- lower level fighters. We have seen some movement, you know, out of our AO, specifically when we put large amounts of forces into East Rashid. So there wasn't any specific thing that I drew from there, but they did move out of our AO. I would say that there was not much influence coming from there into our AO, again because we flooded it with U.S. forces.

Q Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Andrew.

Q Colonel, yes, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from the Military Observer. Thanks for taking the time to speak with us again, sir. Sir, can you talk to us a bit about your unit's role in the Operation Phantom Phoenix?

COL. RISCASSI: I'm sorry, you're breaking up a little bit. Just to repeat, do you want to know about my role in Phantom Phoenix?

Q Yes, sir.

COL. RISCASSI: Okay. You know, right now I cannot give you my role in Phantom Phoenix because that is not one of the brigade operations. That is an MND -- Multinational Division North -- operation, of which I provide forces to that division. However, I cannot comment on that operation.

Q Okay. The reason I ask, sir, is, as it's reported down here, there are some airstrikes in Arab Jabour that were also reported as part of -- they're reporting Phantom Phoenix as more of a nationwide operation, not just MND North. Or are there several operations going on in conjunction with Phantom Phoenix?

COL. RISCASSI: Okay, we are looking at that right now. But as far as I can comment, as far as the regiment coming out of East Rashid, I am not in that operation.

Currently, the brigade is in transition to assume a different role within MND -- Multinational Division-Baghdad, so we are in a transition role. The regiment currently is not operating -- involved in that operation.

Q Okay.

COL. RISCASSI: And -- and just for clarification, you know, that is a corps operation, but I'm not involved in that.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: David.

Q Hi. Sir, this is David Axe of "The War is Boring." Can you tell me more about the vetting process for the CLCs, and then also how you keep sort of overwatch over them as they play their role?

COL. RISCASSI: Absolutely. It's a very detailed vetting process. One of the most significant things that we do is that to work as -- in the CLC program you have to come out of that neighborhood or mahala that you're being hired for. For example, you cannot come from a different place of Baghdad or outside of Baghdad and come down and work in the program in that mahala that you're working for. So residency is a number one requirement for us to hire these local citizens.

What we've also done is we -- when we hired these local nationals, we have basically a board that they come and they present themselves to. They bring all the required paperwork, documentation and proof, who they are. They bring documentation to prove their residency. They come in, and they will meet with us through an interpreter; we'll do an interview process. And then, most importantly, a local leader in a mahala will validate or verify the status of this individual. Then we'll get him into the program and train him and put him to work.

Q So once they've been hired, how do you sort of keep tabs on these CLCs? Are they divided into units that have, what, liaisons, U.S. liaisons, or something like that?

COL. RISCASSI: Not exactly. You know, once we complete our vetting process here, to clarify one point, is those names get submitted to the Iraqi government and they come back down cleared and we're cleared to hire them. But after that they have actually supervisors. We will hire a supervisor that we link into, and he'll have under him, depending on the checkpoints that he's working for, you know, 10 to 30 local nationals. And we'll work through the leaders to make sure that they are going to work and they're established.

Now, bigger than that is, they do not -- just for clarification, they do not work for -- necessarily for the U.S. forces.

They're there to support and work for the Iraqi army. And these guys, once they're hired into the CLC program, one of the things that they can do is they could submit to -- enroll into the Iraqi police or the Iraqi army from that program. So it's sort of a stepping stone into both of those programs.

Q So we don't really have a follow-up role, then.

COL. RISCASSI: I'm sorry. You're breaking up. Can you say that question again, please?

Q You don't really have a responsibility to follow up on the CLCs after you've helped hire them.

COL. RISCASSI: No, I wouldn't say that. We hired them. We check on them daily. We have -- our company commanders, if they fall into the area that we are responsible for, we will drive by, we will check on them. We have checklists to make sure that they're doing the right things, that they are in uniform, that they're presenting themselves well, they're acting well. And then we also, for their pay -- it comes through us. We pay the leadership, and we supervise the payment of those. So we do work closely with them on a daily basis.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Kim?

Q Yes. You said that you have forces spread through Baghdad, working on remaining al Qaeda strongholds. I wonder if you can comment on first the extent to which Hadar became a stronghold after the clearing of Natsafi (sp), or whether they were both strongholds at the same time that you had to reduce one by one; and then, secondly, if you can comment on other places in Baghdad where al Qaeda has strongholds as significant as these.

COL. RISCASSI: Okay. First I'll take the Hadar -- the Southeast Rashid. When we into there, it was -- through our analysis and what we were given as our mission from Multinational Division Baghdad, it was a stronghold of al Qaeda. That was our mission, to go in there and specifically clear out AQI from Southeast Rashid. And we accomplished that mission, as I stated earlier.

As far as throughout Baghdad with our other squadrons, a Stryker organization is unique and it is very -- very suited to this mission in Baghdad. So we provide forces to other brigade combat teams within their AO, whether they're fighting AQI or JAM special groups. They're throughout those four other brigades. And like I said, we are transitioning -- again within the MND-B, the Baghdad footprint -- to another mission in another AO but with the same mission set, to restrict and clear out and destroy AQI in that area of operation.

Q And if I could follow up also on the question of CLCs. When I was in Dura in May, one of the problems that the company commanders were seeing is that a lot of the residents of Dura had been displaced from other areas of Baghdad. How are you handling the folks who are living in Hadar? Do you find that they have been living there for a long time, that they are moving back into that area, or that they come from other areas of Baghdad? How are you establishing their residency?

COL. RISCASSI: That's a great point. I will tell you that when we first went into Hadar -- and you made note that there was very few people in Hadar. But today, I will tell you, it looks totally different. We have families moving back into Hadar on a daily basis. They want to move there. Stores are opening back up. Markets are opening back up. The Dura market area -- Dura is a little bit north of where I was, just north of where I was, and they're experiencing the same thing. So families are not leaving in the Southeast Rashid, Dora, Hadar area of operations. Matter of fact, they are returning. Many families are returning.

However, I did meet many families down there that were there for many, many years, and they stayed throughout all this turmoil. And they were very, very happy to see us, and they're happy that we're staying there. And those are -- a lot of our volunteers are from those (local nationals who stayed ?) in the area.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Charlie?

Q Yes. Thank you very much. Colonel, this is Charlie Quidnunc at the Wizbang Podcast. I had a question about a meeting last week. There was a presentation at a think tank in Washington, the Heritage Foundation, and a panel discussion there on progress in Iraq. In his remarks, an Army historian said that this is a colonel's war; that a typical colonel today has as much responsibility in terms of civilian population and coalition and ISF and security as a general would have had in the last war. Do you think we're expecting too much of our colonels or too much of our officers today, or are they up to it?

COL. RISCASSI: You know, I'm not familiar with that presentation, but I will tell you I would draw it down a little bit further, is our company commanders and our soldiers, we're putting a lot of weight on their shoulders. But they're doing a fantastic job. I often say that I'm not sure I could do the job that I'm asking our company commanders to do today. Not only are they doing the war-fighting piece, and they're doing that extremely well, they're working essential services, they're working with the local governments, they're working with the population on a daily basis, out there living with the local population.

So it is very different today, but they're well-trained and they're well-led across all of Iraq, and they're doing a great job.

I'm not sure I'd buy in and say it was a colonel's war. Colonels are very, very busy as well. They're out there doing stuff, but if you want to talk about the fight, it's really a company commander fight and below. But what us colonels do is we try to help them out as best as we can - we coordinate their efforts, we supply them, we do the engagements with the senior leaders, but they're on the ground every day making it happen.

Q Excellent. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Had a few other folks call in. Who else is with us here?

Q Jarred Fishman.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jarred, do you have a question for Colonel Riscassi?

Q Yes, sir, thank you. Could you talk a little bit about the progress you've seen from the time the tour started until now as far as the interactions among the Iraqis on the ground? We can see, obviously, all the numerous positive news stories that are coming about about the developments, but perhaps talk a little bit more to the human interactions about -- is there any kind of improvement in their skill set, in their ability to work among each other on the security field with the different agencies that you have to deal with in the nahiyas, in the different districts, in the different regions and the towns? What's just the feeling amongst the professionalism of the Iraqis you have to deal with now?

COL. RISCASSI: I can speak directly to that from the five months we've been doing operations down in Hadar. From what I've seen -- you know, having forces throughout Baghdad, I get to travel on a daily basis throughout Baghdad, and I will tell you that -- almost everyone will tell you that this has to be an Iraqi solution. And from my viewpoint, all across the board they're stepping up this fight and they're working hard. There is a lot of work still to be done. This is still a very, very dangerous place; every day it's dangerous. But they are stepping up, doing work. The CLCs, the volunteers across the board, that is a big thing here; I can speak specifically for Baghdad. And where they are out in force and doing their jobs, they have dramatically reduced the violence in that AO, and I always want to just speak specifically to Hadar, southeast east Rashid where we're working, but I'm able to see that across Baghdad. It's working well.

They are supporting their local governments. They are becoming more vocal in telling the local governments their needs and getting a voice, and that is very, very big for them -- and especially when they tell their needs. For example, needing electricity, clean water, sewage pick-up, street repair, and their local government is able to come through and give those things. It seems to feed on itself and come around very well.

So in our short time here already I've seen definite turnaround in the local nationals here in Iraq.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anyone else joined us? (No audible response.)

Okay. Do we have any follow-up questions?

Q Yes, this is Kim Kagan again from the Institute for the Study of War, and I wonder if you can comment -- could you tell us if Hadar -- can you tell us whether Hadar is an important neighborhood within Rashid? What significance do you think Hadar has within Rashid?

What significance do you think Hadar has within Rashid?

COL. RISCASSI: Well, I will tell you, within -- you're breaking up a little bit. Important -- Hadar, important in Rashid -- yes, it is. And I'll tell you why. Because up until we showed up in Hadar, it was an al Qaeda stronghold. So in that sense, since they had sanctuary there, they were able to influence the rest of Rashid from that location in Hadar.

Since we were able to clear al Qaeda out and we have permanent presence there and working hard getting people back to work, the local economy's stood up. And as you know, the economy isn't bound by the boundaries of roads. It feeds into each other across Rashid, into Dora, over into West Rashid, in the surrounding areas, in the Five Farms. So it's all tied to each other.

But the biggest thing Hadar was is it was a sanctuary for al Qaeda, and since we removed that sanctuary, it's able to start -- I'll say again, start thriving again and being -- contribute to the local economy throughout the Rashid district.

MR. HOLT: All right. Did anyone --

Q I have a follow-up.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Yeah, go.

Q Sir, the newspapers here in the States were reporting -- obviously, they can't really deny the security improvements with the new CLCs, but over the weekend, they were trying to insinuate that, well, basically we've just created 50 more militias which are going to be killing each other as soon as we draw down. And their main point was saying, well, Rashid, yeah, it might be safer now, but as soon as we leave, they're going to be fighting with their next-door neighbors, you know, so that now you have the Sunni and the Shi'a neighborhood throughout Baghdad, and as soon as we pull out, the two militias will just go at it -- cats and dogs. What's your feeling on that score as far as their loyalty to the central government and their ability to continue to work in a tranquil manner with each other?

COL. RISCASSI: You know, that's a good question. And from my viewpoint on the ground here, you know, I do not see that. For the vast majority of Iraqis, the very, very vast majority of Iraqis, they want a secure, safe place to live. I mean, that's what they want. And the CLCs are providing that to them. And again, they come from the neighborhoods that they are working in and that they are providing security for, and they are -- they're out there working, and we check on them. Again, not only us; the Iraqi army will check on them.

They're out there in plain view. They're out there in uniform. They're out there in static positions where everybody knows where they are, and that is their place of duty.

I've seen no indication in my AO or have I heard of where they are fighting each other or -- and any indication of that. What this does is provides them a job and it provides a service to the community, and again, it's played big dividends across -- not only in southeast Rashid, but across Baghdad from what I've been able to see.

MR. HOLT: Anyone else?

All right, sir.

Q Actually, this is Kim Kagan again. I have one more question. Could you -- can you tell me, do you think that there will -- it will need to be kinetic operations in and around Hadar even as the bulk of your forces roll out? And -- yeah, that's the question I have.

COL. RISCASSI: Well, Kim, good question. I'll tell you, we are not rolling out of east Rashid. I will have a unit that stays there working for Colonel Gibbs, but let's hope not -- that there's not anymore need for kinetic operations. But we are prepared for that. Like I said, this is a very, very dangerous place. We've reduced events in southeast Rashid significantly, but they're still there. There are still IEDs that are found. There are still ordnance caches that are found. So let's hope there's not anymore kinetic events, but we are prepared for that, and the Iraqi army, national police -- as well as the national police are prepared for that. But I can't stay that it will not happen.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q If we have another minute, I guess I can ask a question, too. What's the interaction with the national authority? Obviously if you're dealing with Sunni, you know, CLCs and then -- you mentioned -- you touched a little bit about their support as far as building roads and getting those services, electricity and sanitation. Has there been any progress about the central government based in Baghdad provisioning services to those kinds of places like Dura or Rashid or Hadar?

COL. RISCASSI: Absolutely. You know, all of our requests -- we are not doing this strictly U.S. I mean, these requests, these needs, you know, are pushed up through the Iraqi process, they're approved, and then they are completed by the Iraqis. So that is working, that has worked. What we do as -- you know, if you are a land owner -- land-owning unit and they're responsible for you, you try to get a voice to those, you try to collect those up. So within the U.S. forces we are tracking the needs, but all of the requests go up through and are approved from the Iraqis and, of course, they're sourced through the Iraqis. I'll give you an example. As, you know, trash pick-up, that kind of sanitation work that we got done down in Hadar, that was all Iraqi-requested and Iraqi-provided. So that worked out extremely well.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anyone else? (No audible response.)

All right. We're about out of time here, and I'd like to thank you all for joining us, the Bloggers Roundtable here with Colonel John Riscassi, the commander of the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, Multinational Division Baghdad.

Thank you very much, sir, for being with us this morning.

COL. RISCASSI: I thank you, and I appreciate you all taking the time to speak with me this evening. I apologize for the connection. It was a little rough on my end, but I hope you're able to hear me okay.

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir, I think we've got you loud and clear. Thank you very much, and hopefully we'll speak again in the not too distant future.

COL. RISCASSI: All right. Thank you. Out here.

MR. HOLT: Thanks.

Q Great. Thank you, Colonel.

Q Great.

END.